

Outdoor footwear, clothing and equipment

Walking is one of the most accessible pastimes: you can safely walk in towns or easy countryside without any specialist clothing or equipment at all, though it's always best to take sensible shoes or boots and warm and waterproof clothing if you want to go on longer walks or deeper into the countryside. Beyond that, a huge range of equipment is available to make your walking easier, safer and more comfortable. This page is an introduction to clothing and equipment for walking in lowland countryside and low hills.

Most walkers find the gear that suits them through experience. The golden rule is, be comfortable, dress for the sort of weather and terrain you are likely to meet, and never underestimate the changeability of British weather!

Footwear

Boots or shoes?

Feet are probably the most important part of a walker's body, so treat them with care. If you want to walk regularly in all kinds of weather, especially on longer walks out in the countryside, you should invest in some footwear especially for walking.

- **Walking boots** with tough moulded soles are the best all-round solution, protecting the feet and keeping them warm and dry, providing grip and supporting the ankles, essential on steep slopes.
- **Walking shoes** are a lighter alternative to boots, offering a tough protective sole with good grip, but no ankle support.
- Good quality **trainers** are a cheap and lightweight solution preferred by some walkers. They are fine for urban walks and walks along good paths in lowland countryside in good weather, but are usually not waterproof and give limited support and protection.
- **Walking sandals** for lowland use in summer have solid soles suitable for a variety of surfaces but give no ankle support and less protection from undergrowth or sharp rocks, so should be used with great discretion.

Buying boots

An enormous range of walking boots is now available. As well as heavy, robust boots for rugged conditions, there are lighter boots for summer walking, and though traditional leather uppers remain popular, lighter, "breathable" waterproof fabrics are also used. Boots are increasingly available to suit different sorts of feet, in narrow and wide, and men's and women's fittings, and you can even get boots made to measure, at a price.

What you choose will depend on when and where you want to walk, your budget and your personal preferences, and the perfect boot for one walker will rarely suit another walker, so it's worth taking some time to find out what's around. When choosing your boots, remember:

- look for **proper walking boots** from a good outdoor shop: beware of high street fashion boots that look like walking boots but will not give you the comfort or protection you need
- boots are best worn with thick socks, so **wear a pair of walking socks** when trying them on, most outdoor shops will lend you a pair
- **take time** choosing, ask for advice, and above all else make sure the boot feels comfortable
- when **laced**, the boot should hold firmly around your entire foot without it feeling too cramped, your heel should not move, and your big toe should not be pressing against the uppers
- feet **expand** during the day so go shopping in the afternoon
- try to visit a shop with an **incline board** so you can test boots for your downhill foot position, or stand with the heel on a small step and the toe on the floor. If your foot slips forward when going downhill it's not the right boot for you
- if you can't find boots that fit well, ask the shop about **footbeds** or **insoles**
- **borrow** the boots to try indoors at home if the shop allows you to do this, and spend as much time in them as possible

It is not recommended to buy second hand footwear for serious walking: footwear moulds to its owner's feet and can cause discomfort and blisters if worn by someone else once worn in.

Caring for boots

To keep your boots as supple and as waterproof as possible, treat them according to the manufacturers' instructions. Make sure your boots are kept clean and, if they become wet, fill them with scrunched-up newspaper and place them away from direct heat to dry, then clean them as normal. Remember, boots are a long-term investment, so it will pay to look after them.

Modern boots will usually feel comfortable when new, but you should still wear them in before you undertake a major walk in them, so that the uppers soften and the boot moulds to your foot.

Socks

Boots are usually more comfortable when worn with good walking socks. Modern socks, often made from synthetic looped material, are designed with extra padding around toes and heels to cushion impact and without potentially irritating raised seams, and some are made from material that "wicks" sweat outwards. You can even buy waterproof socks.

Some walkers wear two pairs of socks, a thin pair made from cotton or synthetic fabric next to the skin, and a thicker pair on top: this helps cushion the feet and prevent blisters.

Good walking socks should be tough enough to last for a while. Discard heavily worn or holed socks; don't attempt to repair them. On long walks bumps, holes and darning stitches can soon cause irritation and blistering.

Clothing

Waterproof and windproof wear

In the British climate, a good quality **waterproof** (not just showerproof) and windproof jacket or anorak is essential. Look for something with at least a hood, or provision for a hood to be attached, and with spacious pockets for maps, snacks and so on. A cheap lightweight cagoule will do the job but if you plan to do a lot of walking, consider a jacket made from 'breathable' material which allows sweat out but stops rain getting in.

You can buy jackets in all price brackets and in a variety of styles, fabrics and waterproofing systems: as with boots, your choice will depend on your needs, tastes, and budget. Various refinements include storm flaps to prevent water getting in through the zip, reinforced hoods for better visibility, drawcords, taped seams, adjustable cuffs and ventilation features. Modern waterproofing techniques are impressive but even the most expensive high tech waterproof won't keep you totally dry in exceptionally bad weather.

To stop your trousers and socks from getting wet or muddy, consider waterproof **overtrousers**, or **gaiters** - knee-high waterproof leggings that attach to the boot. Both have their champions, but both can be difficult to put on and take off. Overtrousers are available in a similar range of fabrics to jackets, including high tech breathable models.

Look after your waterproofs carefully in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions. Waterproofing can fail due to lack of care and cleanliness, or because the garment has been cleaned incorrectly: it will also wear out over time. Some fabrics can be re-waterproofed: consult the manufacturer or the retailer.

Inner layers

The basic principle of outdoor clothing is the **layering** system. Several thin layers are more useful than just one thick sweatshirt or large jumper, since warm air will be trapped between the layers and provide better insulation, and you can add or remove layers as required according to the weather and your level of activity.

The "**base layer**" nearest the body is best made of thin synthetic material with the capability of "wicking" moisture away from the skin and drying quickly. Natural fibres like cotton are not recommended since they absorb sweat and make you clammy. Wicking base layers work especially well with breathable jackets.

Between base layer and jacket you can add one or more insulating **mid-layers**, usually made of an open-weave or knit fabric, such as a fleece. You can wear an ordinary sweatshirt, jersey or high street fleece but a good fleece specially designed for outdoor use could keep you warmer and more comfortable. Some of these are also windproof, keeping you warmer in cold winds even if worn without a top layer. A zip down the front allows you to ventilate as much or as little as required.

Trousers

Tracksuit bottoms or everyday casual trousers are fine for the average lowland walk, though on long walks they can irritate and chafe in ways that would not be noticed in normal use. Modern synthetic walking trousers are popular among regular walkers, since they are lightweight, loose-fitting, quick-drying and have handy pockets. Some walkers wear walking shorts if the weather is fine, though long trousers offer better protection against brambles, nettles and ticks and should always be carried in case the weather changes.

Denim jeans should be avoided, as they restrict movement, lack pocket space, and take a long time to dry out if wet when they can cause chafing. They have a high wind-chill factor which means you can get very cold in them, especially if they get wet.

Head and hands

Up to 40% of body heat is lost through the head, so it is essential to protect your head and ears. A warm hat is a must in winter, especially in the hills, and it can be worn under a jacket hood.

When it's sunny, wear a sunhat and use sun cream on your face and any bare patches of skin. You may be out in the sun for long periods without shelter and even in a cooling wind or in winter you can still get burnt.

Gloves are also important in cold weather, especially for those who have circulation problems. To walk comfortably and with a good posture you should be able to swing your arms freely, so putting your hands in your pockets is not an option.

Equipment

Rucksacks

Wherever you walk, rucksacks or backpacks are the best means of carrying what you need: they leave the hands free, and are far more comfortable than a shoulder bag over a long distance. Modern rucksacks are made of tough and waterproof nylon or polyester fabric and lightweight alloy frames.

The simplest rucksack is a small **daysack**, which is usually frameless and has only shoulder straps so that all the weight is carried on the shoulders. Larger and more sophisticated **travel packs** and **backpacks** have frames, hip-belts and chest straps to help distribute the weight more evenly across the back. Many models now have ventilation features to avoid a sweaty back, and some are designed especially to fit women, or children.

Always choose the best size rucksack for the purpose. A daysack of around 20 litres capacity is fine for walks of a day or less but will quickly become uncomfortable across the shoulders if loaded too heavily. But a large, half-empty rucksack is unnecessary weight. For weekends and short breaks, or when you need to carry more equipment, there are various medium-sized packs of 30-55 litres. For longer holidays, or for serious backpacking with camping equipment, large packs with a capacity of 55-75 litres are available.

Inspect several different types, try each one on - not just empty but with a load - and, most importantly, see if it fits and feels comfortable. Check that the system of straps and belts distributes the weight evenly, and that it can be adjusted to provide a comfortable fit. You may also want to check out additional features such as ice-axe loops, key clips and concealed security pockets.

Other equipment

- **Map, compass and navigation equipment.**
- **Walking poles** can be useful on more rugged walks
- **Full water bottle** and/or thermos flask, adequate for your walk.
- **Extra clothing**, especially in winter
- **Food**, unless you're absolutely sure you'll be able to eat on the way
- **Emergency rations**
- A first aid kit and any medicines you might need
- Optionally, a mobile phone

And don't forget making room for non-essential items that might make your walk more enjoyable: notebook, pencil, camera, guidebooks and so on.

Suggested Reading

- *Using and caring for your outdoor clothing & equipment*, free leaflet from Go Outdoors
- Equipment reviews and useful advice and information in the magazines *Country Walking* (for generally easier, lowland walking), *Trail* and *TGO* (for more demanding walking), available from newsagents

This information has been extracted from an article on the Ramblers Association website.

<http://www.ramblers.org.uk/>